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ABSTRACT

Three empirical studies focused on viewer reactions to ethical issues in television news, and on actions audience members felt were appropriate to control possibly unethical behaviors in television broadcasting. The first study was a 12-minute telephone survey of 293 randomly selected adults in Minneapolis-St. Paul (Minnesota) in 1989 to determine public responses to ethical issues. The first study demonstrated that people can and do think about television content problem areas. In the second study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a quota sample of 34 television news viewers in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Viewers were willing and capable of speaking at length about television news issues and of analyzing three hypothetical news stories. The third study combined techniques of the first two studies to identify how viewers evaluate ethically controversial local television news content. Using random-digit dialing, 201 Minneapolis-St. Paul local television news viewers were selected for 30-minute telephone interviews and subsequent mail survey concerning their reactions to six hypothetical news stories. Three trends emerged: (1) certain criteria were much more commonly applied than others, including harm/benefits, newsworthiness, and parameters; (2) many unique criteria applied in each situation; and (3) the exact criteria differed according to the situation. A preliminary model of the process viewers use to evaluate ethical issues in television programming was developed. Findings show the usefulness of using multiple research methodologies. Future research should supplement traditional philosophical and case study analyses with empirical studies of audience response to ethical issues in the media. (Contains 36 references.) (RS)

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RESEARCH ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

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RESEARCH ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

Media scholars have long focused on ethical choices made by media decision makers, and on the ethical implications of such content as deceptive advertising, racial and sex stereotyping, and sensational or biased news coverage (e.g. Christians, et al, 1991). An extensive literature exists on how the audience evaluates the general quality of TV programming (e.g., Bower, 1985; Bower, 1973; Steiner, 1963), audience response to persistent problems such as violent content, children's TV, and TV advertising (Bower, 1985; Robinson, et al, 1979; Lipton, 1990); and on possible problems in the credibility of TV news (Powers, 1977; Gaziano, 1988). Far less attention has been paid to how audience members feel about ethical problems in TV content. We know little about how sensitive viewers are to possible ethical problems in TV programming, how they evaluate ethical issues in news and entertainment programs, and what actions (if any) they take to deal with ethical problems.

There are many possible reasons for this lack of attention to audience reaction to ethical problems in TV content. As we will note, there is little directly relevant literature and no directly relevant theory to guide such research. Thus, concepts and definitions are lacking, as are validated measurement instruments. Also, early research efforts (Lind, 1992a; 1992b) have been time consuming and expensive. However, these factors may be present at the inauguration of any new program of research, and should not deter scholars from investigating an important phenomenon.

Since 1989 we have conducted a series of empirical studies on the TV audience focusing on viewer reactions to ethical issues in TV news and entertainment programming, and on what actions, if any, audience members feel are appropriate to control possibly unethical behaviors in TV broadcasting. This paper is a review of some of the theoretical and methodological issues that face researchers who attempt to use empirical methods to investigate audience response to possible ethical problems in TV programming. In it we will outline our four-year program of research and use it to illustrate some of the key issues facing researchers doing this type of work. Our program of research has five main objectives: 1) What do TV viewers see as the most serious ethical issues in TV news and entertainment programming, and why?; 2) How do viewers think about ethical issues in TV programming? What criteria do they use to judge ethical issues?; 3) How do ethical

evaluations enter into viewer judgments on whether certain programs should be run? How sensitive and aware are audience members about ethical problems in TV?; 4) How do viewer reactions to ethics of TV relate to such factors as cognitive processing of TV, social environment, media literacy, level of education, gender, race and other demographics, etc.? What concepts should be included in a theory of viewer response to ethical issues in TV?; and 5) How do viewers feel about methods of social control of ethically controversial TV content? What methods of control do they favor and what behaviors do they enact in attempts to control unethical content?

These objectives can be contrasted with most media ethics scholarship which traditionally has been humanistic in nature and based on critical analyses of media problem areas using philosophical models or case studies of problematic incidents faced by media decision makers (Cooper et al, 1988). We argue that although philosophical and case study analyses are crucial and fundamental to the study of media ethics, these traditional methods can and should be supplemented with empirical studies of audience behaviors and attitudes. We have argued that empirical audience studies help ground ethics analyses in issues that actually concern people, and also suggest new concepts and variables for analysis (Rarick & Lind, 1992). Additionally, empirical studies are of use to broadcasters who wish to be sensitive to audience needs, as well as educators who wish to increase the level of media literacy in our society.

Thus, in this review we cover four basic research issues that must be addressed if the empirical study of TV ethics is to advance: 1) Development of conceptual and operational definitions of key concepts; 2) Refinement and further development of test instruments; 3) Enlargement of studies to additional subject populations in more diverse settings; and 4) Development of new theories of audience perceptions of ethical issues, program viewing and processing, and behavioral responses to ethical problems in TV programming. This paper cannot cover all the relevant issues in researching media ethics using empirical methods, but will focus mainly on our program of research, and on methods and theories we have found most useful.

Literature Review: Prior Research in Moral Development and Media Credibility

When we began our research in 1989, we wanted to find out how TV viewers evaluate ethical issues in TV programming, and what means they advocate to control possibly problematic

content. We found a lack of literature relevant to audience reactions to possible ethical problems in TV programming. Related research was very diverse, scattered across a variety of fields, and not well organized. We found no theories and very little research relevant to how audience members evaluate ethical issues in the media. Thus we searched the literature in many related areas to assist us in developing our research. We began by identifying some of the most common ethical problems in TV programming that had been repeatedly analyzed in media ethics texts and in scholarly analyses of TV ethics, most of which used philosophical analyses or case study methods (e.g., Christians, et al, 1991; Fink, 1988; Cooper, 1988). From these sources we were able to identify a number of prominent ethical issues which helped us later develop scenarios or short TV program descriptions that appeared to represent common ethical problems in TV (such as biased or sensational news, violence, stereotyping, invasion of privacy, etc.). However, as useful as this information was, it did not provide a theoretical perspective to guide us. Thus we continued searching many diverse literatures, and found that the two areas most useful to our research seemed to be the psychology of moral development and media credibility research.

Media Credibility Studies

The 1980s was a period of concern about public distrust of the media. The extensive literature on media credibility generated during that period contains several major surveys comparing the credibility of TV and newspapers, as well as identifying persistent problems in media performance as seen by the public--especially in news (e.g., Gaziano, 1988; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Such studies aided us in our development of a list of the most common public complaints about media performance, and allowed us to evaluate the survey methods used to measure public attitudes in these studies. However, although this literature is useful in validating the most common ethical problems identified from the media ethics texts, and in suggesting methods for measuring audience response to possible problems in the media, it does not deal directly with the issue of TV ethics. While media credibility studies deal with issues and problems that may have ethical implications for some audience members, the notion of "ethics" is not specifically tested or used as a variable. A further problem with the credibility research is that it tends to focus on analyses of the source or the medium, rather than the audience. As Gunther

(1992) noted, ". . . credibility has been defined primarily as an attribution of the source; the unit of analysis is typically a particular newspaper, or a media institution, such as television" (p. 148). He continued, saying "Even when credibility is measured in the audience, as in public opinion surveys, the outcome is typically represented as an attribute of media. . . . One alternative orientation lies in defining credibility not as an objective property of the source, but as a receiver perception" (p. 148).

This view is consistent with our general evaluation of the media ethics literature, which also has tended to see ethical behavior as a problem for the media and an issue to be dealt with by media decision makers, rather than as a broad issue in which media, society, and audience hold equally important responsibilities and roles. Our research is partly designed to redress this imbalance and bring the roles, behaviors, and responsibilities of the audience members more clearly into focus in the debate over media ethics.

Moral Development Research

Our concern with focusing on the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of audience members regarding TV ethics is also informed by the rich literature on moral development. Influenced by the work of Piaget (1932; 1967) on cognitive and moral development in children, Kohlberg's (1981) research sees moral development as a function of cognitive abilities, and uses the moral judgment interview as his major research method. In the interview, subjects respond to hypothetical dilemmas (i.e., should a man steal an overpriced drug to save his wife's life) by answering a series of questions. Through content analysis of subjects' interview responses, Kohlberg argues he is able to identify an invariant sequence of stages of moral development. This line of research is not directly useful in our work, since it focuses on the structures and patterns of reasoning about moral issues rather than on the actual content of the decisions, but we found it most useful in developing one of our central research instruments: the test of ethical dilemmas embedded in short TV program scenarios or descriptions.

We gathered the most commonly noted ethical problems in TV programming identified from the media ethics and journalistic credibility research and wrote short (40-75 word) descriptions of TV program content. Rather than trying (as Kohlberg would) to assess the audience members' level of moral development, we focused on the content of what the person said about the TV program

itself. Our review of the moral development literature was also useful in identifying methods for analyzing interviews about moral issues (Kohlberg, et al, 1978), focusing on problems in content analysis of moral issue interviews (Cortese, 1984), developing scenarios or hypothetical ethical dilemmas for use in research (Walker, et al, 1987), and in helping develop a theory of audience response to ethical issues in media (Rest, 1979). Following this survey of the literature we began our research to identify audience responses to ethical issues in TV programming.

Our continuing program of research thus far has progressed through three basic phases, with differing focal points and orientations: 1) Testing issues and scenarios; 2) Testing viewer reasoning about ethical issues; and 3) Defining concepts and identifying criteria for ethical judgment. Each of these phases, which are described below, can be considered in terms of the four basic research issues mentioned previously (development of conceptual and operational definitions of key concepts, refinement and further development of test instruments, enlargement of studies to additional subject populations in more diverse settings, and development of new theories of audience perceptions of ethical issues, program viewing and processing, and behavioral responses to ethical problems in TV programming).

Phase I of TV Ethics Research: Testing Issues and Scenarios

Since we had little audience research and no existing media ethics theory to guide us, we began with a broad investigation of some factors the literature suggested might be relevant to how people respond to ethical issues in TV programming. Our first study was a short (12-minute) phone survey of 293 randomly-selected adults in Minneapolis-St. Paul in 1989 to determine: 1) public response to ethical issues in TV news and entertainment programs; 2) public evaluation of common ethical dilemmas embedded in TV programs; and 3) public attitudes toward social control of problematic TV content (Lind & Rarick, 1992). This study was similar to the media credibility studies in that it generated much data on public attitudes and opinions without exploration of any underlying issues or reasoning.

The instruments for areas 1 and 3 above were straightforward Likert-type rating scales in which respondents were presented with, in the first instance, a list of eight areas of controversy in TV news and entertainment (i.e., violence, adult language, unfair news reporting, invasion of

privacy, etc.) and asked to rate each as "not a problem," "some problem," or "big problem." Similarly, we tested attitudes towards methods of social control of TV by asking subjects to rate six control methods (i.e., government regulation, viewer complaints, citizen group action) on a three point scale from "agree" to "disagree".

The central focus of the study was to ask respondents to evaluate eight ethical dilemmas in TV news and entertainment programming. The development of the instrument for the phone survey was quite challenging, since it had to be brief and easily administered over the phone, encompass clearly an ethical issue in TV and include a moral dilemma, and use a simple rating or scoring system that would provide valuable and relevant data. In developing this instrument, we experimented with nine different versions of an ethical judgment instrument. Initially, we wrote 50-word TV program descriptions that posed an ethical dilemma, following Kohlberg's procedure, and asked pre-test volunteers to identify "ethical problems." This was not workable, since subjects were not clear what we meant by "ethical problem," and we did not wish to pre-define our concepts before data gathering. We also tried asking subjects to rate the scenarios on a scale from "very ethical" to "very unethical." This too was unworkable, since subjects were confused as to what was meant by "ethical" and "unethical." Subjects also had questions regarding which aspect of the TV description was being judged, and from whose perspective ethicality should be judged. Ultimately, we reduced the issue to the basic question of "should this program be run on TV?". Our pre-test subjects found this question quite understandable and relevant to their experience as TV viewers.

We then shortened the TV program descriptions containing the ethical dilemma to about 20 to 30 words; for example: "A child is killed in a fire. The TV news interviews her crying parents soon after the fire. The parents ask for better fire safety." In this description, an ethical dilemma is created, since moral values compete. The respondent is forced to think about the issue and resolve it by deciding whether the positive social outcome of a possibly anti-social act on the part of the broadcaster justifies running the program. We generated seven additional TV program descriptions and pretested them in at least five versions for clarity, presence of a dilemma, and relevance to viewers' actual experience with TV.

Thus, in our 1989 phone survey, we asked respondents to rate the eight TV program scenarios (five news; three entertainment) on a 1-5 scale from "definitely should run" to "definitely should not run." We found that viewers were more willing to run TV scenarios containing ethical

problems in news content (i.e., using hidden cameras to expose dishonesty, or using graphic accident footage to discourage drunk driving) than in entertainment content (i.e., showing how a murderer is punished, or ridiculing a man who makes racist/sexist remarks). Regarding methods of control, viewers favored a system of program ratings or warnings, and time/channel restrictions for certain content, but opposed government regulations. In this first study, we demonstrated that people can and do think about TV content problem areas which have been determined by media ethics scholars to have ethical consequences. However, this study was limited in that it did not directly test the degree to which viewers actually saw ethical problems in TV programs, and did not test how viewers thought about or reasoned through ethical issues in TV. Our next step in research sought answers to this latter question.

Thus, in terms of the four basic issues important to the empirical study of audience perceptions of media ethics, this first phase of research was obviously lacking any theoretical grounding. Some important concepts had been borrowed from media credibility research and the moral development literature, but no relationships between concepts were posited. Much of this first phase of research was devoted to the development of conceptual and operational definitions of relevant constructs and of instruments to measure the constructs. Importantly, we were successful using a telephone survey methodology to interview the public regarding their opinions about ethical issues in television programming. The subject population, while randomly selected, was skewed to the better educated and the female.

Phase II: Testing Viewer Reasoning About Ethical Issues

A serious limitation of our initial 1989 phone survey was it provided no way to get at <u>how</u> viewers reasoned or thought about ethical issues in TV. It told us nothing about <u>why</u> viewers rated the scenarios as they did. To gather data on these aspects of evaluation, we did a second study in 1990 using semi-structured interviews with a quota sample of 34 TV news viewers in Minneapolis-St. Paul (Lind & Rarick, 1991). Our purpose was to identify viewer attitudes to selected issues in TV news reporting, and most importantly, to determine whether or not viewers could discuss the criteria or reasoning processes underlying their attitudes toward ethical issues in TV news. This study owed more to moral development research than to credibility research, in that it generated

much detailed data from a limited number of subjects and focused on their reasoning processes. Our instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule which began with six statements about TV news ethics that have been commonly noted in analyses of TV news by media ethics scholars (Christians, et al, 1987; Meyer, 1987.) The statements covered ethical issues such as ratings pressures, objectivity, invasion of privacy, and the watchdog function of the press. For example, "Some people say the journalistic quality of TV news has suffered because newscasts do too many light entertaining stories in order to get high ratings." Viewers were read the statement, and were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed, and why. Then, they were asked an opposing probe. For example, respondents agreeing with the statement were asked, "Having said you agree, can you think of any positive things about having many light entertaining stories on TV newscasts?". Respondents disagreeing with the statement were asked about "any negative things."

The interview also asked subjects to respond to three hypothetical news stories, each structured around a moral dilemma as in the earlier phone survey. For example, "A TV news reporter reveals secret Army files that prove a missile won't work. This shows flaws in our national defense which must be taken care of." As in the 1989 phone survey, respondents were asked "should the TV news run this story or not?", but here there was an emphasis on probing the reasons for the "run" or "not run" response.

The interviews were audiotaped, and informally analyzed. As expected, these 34 viewers differed in their opinions on the ethical issues and differed in whether or not to run the three TV news stories. They offered a wide variety of reasons and criteria to explain their opinions. We were able to generate a list of the major categories of subject response to the six issues and three TV news stories. Most importantly, we found that these viewers were quite willing and capable of speaking at length about the TV news issues and of analyzing the three TV news stories.

This study pointed to the need to go beyond structured closed survey questions, to depth probing of viewers' processes of analysis and reasoning about ethical issues in TV programming. It demonstrated that viewers are able to respond to ethical issues in TV, that they are aware of ethical problems, and can respond to ethical problems with solutions or criticisms when asked to do so. The study also began to suggest how TV viewers think about ethical issues and the kinds of criteria they use to think about ethical problems. Our next step in research required us to begin to ground the studies in a clearer conceptual base, and to begin to define our key concepts in a clearer

way. A major problem facing us at this point was that we had no specific theory of audience response to ethical issues in TV to guide us. Therefore, we drew on existing concepts from the media ethics, media credibility, and moral development literature for our next step in research.

Thus, in terms of the basic issues important to this type of research, the second phase was devoted to revision and refinement of conceptual and operational definitions, and testing the efficacy of an in-depth interview methodology borrowed from the moral development literature. However, the concepts were still not adequately defined, and there was still a notable lack of theory. Additionally, the quota sample was extremely small and not representative of the population.

Phase III: Defining and Testing Concepts and Identifying Criteria for Ethical Judgment

In 1991, Lind conducted a telephone survey to identify how viewers evaluate "ethically controversial" local TV news content and to assess viewer attitudes to selected means of social control of television content (Lind, 1992a; 1992b). This survey combined the structured interview techniques from the 1989 survey with the more in-depth interview techniques from the 1991 interview study. Using random digit dialing, 201 Minneapolis-St. Paul local TV news viewers were selected for a 30-minute phone interview and subsequent mail survey. The basic format of the interview was to read each respondent three hypothetical TV news stories and ask whether or not each story should be run. In addition, viewers were asked a series of probe questions including an opposing probe. For example, respondents saying a story should run were asked, "what are some negative aspects of running this story?". Those saying it should not be run were asked about "some positive aspects". Thus, respondents were asked to see both sides of the ethical issue involved in the story, and to speak to pros and cons of the ethical decision they had made. Viewers were also asked if there was additional news story information needed in order to make their ethical evaluation of the story. Finally, viewers were asked how ethical the TV station was to report the story in that manner. They responded on a 5-point scale from "highly ethical" to "highly unethical." They were then asked what was the most important issue in their judgment of the story, for a total of seven basic questions regarding each scenario.

The survey used slightly longer 35-75 word hypothetical TV news stories which contained what Lind called "ethically controversial" news content. This and other concepts were more clearly defined for this survey:

Ethically controversial content. In ethically controversial news content, moral values compete. For example, the public's right to know might be pitted against matters of national security; the press' responsibility to tell the truth might compete with the responsibility to protect viewers from graphically violent content; and so forth. Understanding the moral nature of the situation, and becoming aware of the competing moral values, takes place in the first of Rest's (1983) four components of moral behavior, as mentioned below.

Viewer evaluations of content. Judgments of what a human or organizational actor ought to do in a given social situation. This entails deciding upon and justifying a course of action, defining the rights and obligations of those involved, and balancing competing claims. This is closely linked with Christians et al's (1991, p. xvii) concept of "appraising human conduct insofar as it can be judged right or wrong in reference to determinative principles." It is also linked with Rest's (1983) Component 2, defining what is morally right in a given situation, as described below. Evaluation of content is operationally defined as a person's response to the questions "Should the station run this story or not run it, as I have read it to you?" and "Taking everything into account, how ethical, that is right or wrong, was the TV station to report the story as I read it to you?"

Ethicality of content. When a respondent was asked how ethical the station was to broadcast certain content in a particular manner, the term "ethical" was defined as "right or wrong". As operationally defined, "ethicality of content" is the respondents' judgment of the overall rightness or wrongness of the story on a 1-5 scale from "highly unethical" to "highly ethical."

Criteria. "Criteria" is defined narrowly as those standards used by individuals in making a determination of whether a particular action is right or wrong. Criteria are utilized in arriving at a moral evaluation of the decisions and behaviors of broadcasters and journalists. "Criteria" is operationally defined as responses to the questions "Why or why not?" (following determination of whether or not the story should be run), and "What are some negative/positive aspects of running this story?". (Question valence depended on whether or not the story had been deemed appropriate for broadcast; that is, respondents who said the story should run were asked about negative aspects, while those who said the story should not run were asked about positive aspects.)

Means of social control of television. These include such methods as government regulation, citizen complaint, limiting certain content to specific times or channels, industry self-regulation, and a system of warnings or ratings, all of which were provided to the respondent in the main interview.

Evaluation of means of social control of television. This is operationally defined as a person's response to the question "Do you agree or disagree with such a system of controlling news content?" for each of the means of social control listed above.

Reasons. "Reasons" is defined narrowly as those explanations of the respondent based on perceived positive and negative aspects of certain methods of social control of television content, which are used to substantiate his or her reported agreement or disagreement with such means of control. "Reasons" is operationally defined as responses to the questions "Why do you feel this way" (following determination of whether or not the respondent agreed or disagreed with a specific means of social control of TV news) and "What are some (negative/positive) aspects of such a system of controlling news content?". Again, as with the criteria, the valence of the question depended on each respondent's judgment of the method of control.

In this study, a total of six stories was tested (there were two parallel forms of the interview, each containing three different scenarios, and having 99 and 102 respondents, respectively). The stories covered common TV news ethics issues such as invasion of privacy, use of hidden cameras, and news bias. Additionally, interviewees were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with certain methods of social control of TV content, ranging from government intervention to citizen group action, and why. The phone interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes but ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. They were audiotaped and transcribed, resulting in approximately 2600 pages of transcripts. A coding system grounded in the interview data identified a total of 18 distinct criteria used by viewers in evaluating the TV news stories, and a total of 34 distinct reasons given by viewers to support their opinions of methods to control TV news.

The 18 criteria used in evaluating content can be grouped into 5 unique bases of evaluation:

(1) The Gathering of Information: Whether or not the situation being investigated is of such a nature that the means of investigation is justified; Whether or not the story itself is newsworthy; Whether or not the media have sufficient proof or information on which to base the story; Whether

or not an interested party had asked that the story, or a portion of it, not be run; Whether or not the proper authorities had been contacted first; and Whether or not it is appropriate for the news media to assume the role evident in this situation.

(2) The Portrayal of the Information: Whether or not the information is portrayed within reasonable parameters; Whether or not the content is sensationalized or sensationalistic; Whether or not the presentation is balanced or biased; Whether or not the story is interesting enough to get viewer attention; Whether or not the public needs to know the whole story; and Whether or not there have been similar treatments of similar stories.

(3) The Impact or Results of the Story: Whether or not the story causes or prevents future harms or benefits.

(4) Legal Factors: Whether or not there are laws or policies that allow or prevent this kind of story, or other legal considerations exist; Whether or not Freedom of Speech/the Press is more important than other considerations; and The degree to which someone's right to privacy should be respected or protected.

(5) Individual Viewer Factors: Whether or not viewer personal experiences or beliefs have led to this judgment; and Whether or not this individual viewer likes or dislikes this type of content..

The 34 reasons used to support opinions of methods of control can be grouped into the following five bases of evaluation:

(1) Content-Oriented: It results in a better news product, which can be more complete, accurate, balanced, or fair; The public can sees both (or all) sides of an issue; It increases diversity in terms of the number of voices and viewpoints heard; News needs more objectivity, since it is too often biased; It increases the uniformity of news product across media outlets; It increases the availability of information to viewers; It allows for the correcting of mistakes and the improvement of inadequate stories; It harms news values or the news product, and limits news and information to viewers; It acts as censorship and inhibits freedom of speech or freedom of the press; and It encourages sensationalism by implying that it is all right to air graphic content.

(2) Viewer-Oriented: These methods inform viewers, and allow them to choose whether to view potentially disturbing content; These methods protect children from being exposed to potentially disturbing content; It protects innocent people from false or harmful allegations; Actions make people feel better, by making their feelings known; People should provide feedback to

broadcasters, by making their opinions known; Certain content bothers viewers who do not wish to see it; Viewers can have too much control over news, which can lead to the viewers deciding what is news; Opinions aren't representative, since those who take action do not represent the total population; Not enough viewers will act, since people are apathetic or cynical; and Viewers who don't like something should change the channel or turn to some other media outlet.

(3) Broadcaster-Oriented: It increases journalistic awareness of the need for accurate, fair, and balanced stories; Station can give viewers what they want, and can be more sensitive to viewers; News needs standards, just like doctors and attorneys; Broadcasters should be responsible for content, and are the best to decide what should be aired; It creates extra work for station, which must keep track of all the input; and The industry shouldn't police itself, since it might be too interested in the outcome of any decisions.

(4) Effectiveness-Oriented: It is an effective means of control, which works and has an impact; Existing methods of control are sufficient, and no others are needed; Systematic polls & surveys are better than relying on individual complaints; It is not a successful means of control, and will not work, or will be ineffective; Without a method of enforcement, codes and standards will not be worthwhile; and Codes themselves can have a negative impact and are unnecessary.

(5) Government-Oriented: It protects the government from false or harmful allegations; and The government and/or laws shouldn't be involved, and should have no control over news.

The following excerpts show the appearance of the evaluative criteria within the context of some of the scenarios. In Example 1, the responses are all brief. They reflect the use of three basic criteria, two of which are used in favor of running the story. Lines 8, 11, 13-14, and 19-21 all indicate a consideration of the benefits which might be associated with the running of the story: people might be encouraged to stop drinking and driving. This respondent also notes that the story might be misleading or biased, but reflects that it is an honest depiction of events (lines 9-10). This represents an application of the balance/bias/completeness criterion; in this case, the story is deemed acceptable. The only criterion used against running the story appears in lines 16-17, and addresses whether or not this individual likes or dislikes a certain type of content. Here, the respondent did not like that content, calling it "really gross." (EE = interviewee, and ER = interviewer.)

EXAMPLE 1:

ER: A TV news reporter covers a story about a fatal car accident. She gets some very graphic footage of the accident scene, and uses shots of paramedics removing the bodies and of beer cans in the car to show the dangers of drinking and driving. Should the TV station run this story or not run it, as I have read it to you?
EE: They can.
ER: Why?
EE: It might help someone to quit drinking and driving. Show the pictures of the terrible scene and the beer cans, and it still might be misleading, but then it is honest, too. People were drinking and now they are dead.
ER: Anything else?
EE: No, just that this is what happens, so it is good to show the younger kids.
ER: What are some negative aspects of running this story?
EE: Well, it is really gross, the accident scene, I mean, I can't stand seeing that.
ER: So, the graphic footage
EE: Yes, but I do say that when they do show these drunk driving scenes to this younger group that maybe they will wake up. And not just young kids but old people too.

Example 2 contains significantly more respondent discourse than example 1, although the respondent employed only three criteria. Note that the entire first portion of the response is somewhat tangential (lines 8-24). The respondent seemed to be beginning to make a point about the inspectors, but it was abruptly terminated as the respondent considered the difficulty of the city fire safety inspector's task. Therefore, no criteria were coded as present in this particular section of the discourse, although there may have been a codable criterion if the first thought unit had been completed. In lines 42-48 there is a well-developed discussion of the benefits resulting from this story, which is continued in lines 52-53. The respondent considers that the story is not biased (lines 50-51), and that it is newsworthy (line 51). The only negatively applied criterion is found in lines 33-38, in which the respondent wonders whether or not the parents' allegation is true or just an unsubstantiated reflection of their grief. So, while the respondent said that there were no negative aspects (line 50), a negative aspect had actually been noted previously.

EXAMPLE 2:

ER: A child is killed in an apartment-building fire. A TV news reporter interviews the child's grief-stricken parents at the fire scene. The parents say that if the fire safety codes were enforced, their child would be alive. Should the TV station run this story or not run it, as I have read it to you?

EE: Yes, it should be run.

ER: Why?

EE: Well, it keeps the inspectors, whether they are part of the city, or the fire department, or they work in conjunction with each other -- I know that they have a big job to do because they have hundreds of buildings to cover at least once a year, I imagine, but how -- Sometimes they just don't have enough personnel to cover a certain area. Especially like these apartment buildings. These apartment buildings -- many of them were built before there was a strict control on fire safety codes. That is to say that some were build 30, 40, 50 years ago. There were no safety codes. In order to build that building, we're talking about apartments now, they didn't have to have those fire alarms, with the battery run --

ER: Smoke alarms?

EE: Yeah, smoke alarms. Now, of course, when a new building is given a permit to be build, they have to have those in there. They have to have them in the apartment buildings or whatever the local codes say, whether it is 2-apartment buildings, or 10, 20, 30. Why, they have to have those smoke alarms in there. Now if this particular apartment building had not been inspected by either the inspection department or the fire personnel who may have a regulation over that city, why then, of course, you could run into a situation where they could say that if the fire safety codes had been enforced, your child could be alive. It would depend on what the city and the inspectors came across. Was it a building that should have had the smoke alarms in there and now, well, even the safety codes are brought up to date where even the old buildings have it now. But it didn't say what particular code might have been violated. So, it could have been speculative. I am sure that most parents would say -- the grief stricken parents would say that their child would be alive. Of course, we don't know the real circumstances as to why -- if the child could have been saved, whether or not there was any violation, according to the city code. In that particular apartment building. That structure.

ER: And again, you did say that the station should run this story.

EE: Yes.

ER: And you mentioned one reason there, is there any others?

EE: Well, it, I am sure that a lot of these business men, or the owners

of the building that they rent to, uh, dwellers. It keeps them on their toes to do the positives. So that it won't happen to their apartment building that they own. So, it keeps them in line, hopefully. Then again, it also makes the citizens around the area mindful that they should have some such fixture in their own home. We are talking about an apartment, you know.

ER: Can you think of any negative aspects of running this story?

EE: I really can't. I don't think there is anything biased about it or anything like that. It certainly is a humane story that we should be told. To protect others and to take the positive step in guarding against such a terrible incident. With their own family, you know.

This long telephone interview method proved to be very productive in terms of eliciting in-depth reasoning and analysis from most respondents. While the depth and sophistication of response varied across respondents, all interviewees were able to at least basically address the questions asked. With this protocol of using three news scenarios, each followed by a series of questions and probes, we can discover how the respondent feels about running the story, the reasoning process leading to the decision, the judgment of the ethics of the story, and an indication of the kinds of additional information needed to evaluate the story in ethical terms.

A secondary method used in this study was a 6-page questionnaire filled out after the interview and returned by mail. This questionnaire elicited demographic information as well as responses to scales on media literacy, TV news credibility, ethical orientation, etc.

The results of this study begin to point to some trends in how viewers think about ethical issues in TV news. First, certain criteria are much more commonly applied across all six stories than others. Some of these include harms/benefits, newsworthiness, parameters, and the public's need to know. Respondents seem very concerned about the impact of a story; they appear to place much value on whether society will benefit or be harmed as the result of a newscast.

A second trend is that even though there are criteria that are more commonly applied than others, there are also many unique criteria applied in each situation. For example, in the story about the child killed in a fire, seven criteria used in favor of running the story (out of the total of 10 which were applied in that situation) were utilized by six or fewer respondents. This means that only three criteria were used by more than six respondents. This trend continues in the other stories, and indicates that while there is a solid basic set of criteria used by many respondents to evaluate certain

stories, there is also much individual variation of criteria selection.

A third trend noted is that although there is a set of more commonly applied criteria, the exact criteria applied differs according to the situation. That is, in each story, one or another of the criteria comes to the fore. For example, in some stories a consideration of the harms/benefits takes precedence, while in other stories a consideration of the story's newsworthiness is more important. The anti war demonstration story, specifically, saw an increase in the use of the balance criterion as compared to its appearance in the other stories.

Thus, in terms of the basic issues important to the empirical study of audience reactions to ethical issues in media, this study began to guide us in developing a theory of viewer evaluations of ethically controversial TV content. Based on the different types of data from this survey, and our examinations of the research and theory in the field of moral development, we have developed a preliminary model of the process viewers might use to evaluate ethical issues in TV programming, which will be discussed below. This study also represented further refinement of conceptual and operational definitions, and showed the usefulness of utilizing multiple research methodologies (depth interviews and self-administered questionnaire). However, more work on increasing the diversity of subjects is still needed--although random digit dialing was used, the sample was skewed to the better educated caucasian female with high interest in both local and national news.

Development of a Theory of Viewer Evaluations of Ethical Issues in TV Programming

The results of the 1991 phone survey by Lind led us to develop a preliminary model of how TV viewers might evaluate and cognitively process ethically controversial TV program content. We drew on and adapted the four-component model of the process of moral behavior by Rest (1979; 1983). Following from Kohlberg's basic theorizing on the cognitive bases for moral development, Rests' four components of moral behavior are: interpreting the situation; determining what course of action would best fulfill a moral ideal; deciding what one actually intends to do by selecting among competing moral and non moral values; and executing and implementing a plan of action. As adapted for viewer evaluations of TV content, the four components became: interpreting the television content and the viewing situation; determining the moral course of broadcaster behavior; deciding what action, if any, ought to be taken by the individual viewer; and implementation of

action by the viewer.

Lind's study, which focused on the second component of the model, has suggested that TV viewers can and do interpret TV news stories in ethical terms, especially when asked to do so in an interview. They appear capable of seeing specific moral/ethical issues in the news stories, they are able to apply their own criteria for evaluating the ethical issues, and they can make some decision about a moral course of action to take (in this case, to decide whether or not the program should be run, and why). Lind's study also demonstrated that TV viewers can also consider other courses of action to take with respect to TV programming, including use of certain social controls such as complaints to stations, and control of children's TV viewing. Based on this research, Lind (1992b) has further adapted the second component of the model. The second component contains a consideration of the degree to which the viewer understands a story; perceives conflicts; perceives an ethical or moral issue; considers ethical principals or norms; and realizes something about the story can affect the welfare of individuals or society. To that basic conceptualization of the second component was added a consideration of some of the basic findings of her research: there are multiple components of story evaluation; there are differential evaluations of stories; there is differential usage of a limited number of evaluative criteria; and there are individual differences among people in their evaluations.

Although our research to date leaves many aspects of the Rest model unexplained, the Rest model appears to have utility for organizing our results and suggesting areas that need future research.

Areas for Future Research

Probably the most serious area for research is investigating to what degree TV viewers actually are sensitive to, and actually are aware of, ethical issues and problems as they view TV. In Rest's (1979) model, interpretation of the situation is the first component of moral behavior. Although our respondents are capable of interpreting a TV program in ethical terms, they have done this exclusively in the context of an interview--when asked to do so. The issue of sensitivity to moral issues in actual situations has not been a key element in Rest's moral development research, either. He notes:

> Strictly speaking, moral judgment refers to that aspect of the psychology of morality dealing with how a person judges which course of action in a social situation is morally right. . . . Moral judgment does not directly deal with a person's sensitivity to noticing that there is a moral dilemma in a particular situation--in tests of moral judgment, the moral dilemma is already precoded in the presentation of the stimulus material and the subject's task. Rest, 1986, p. 455.

We agree with Rest (1986) that we need to know more about sensitivity to moral issues in various situations, persons' willingness to choose moral goals over other goals, and their ability to implement ethical courses of action. Several studies (e.g., Bryant & Zillman, 1991) have monitored audience response to TV content during actual viewing, but none of this work relates directly to viewer evaluations of ethical issues in programming. We are working to develop ways to test viewers while actually viewing video clips of short news stories which contain ethical dilemmas. Additionally, some forms of naturalistic inquiry and observation would benefit this field of study.

A second issue has to do with the reliability and validity of our research methods. Rest (1986) and Cortese (1984) have discussed several ways to assess reliability and validity of traditional moral judgment interview techniques and of standardized moral development tests. For example, interviews/tests may be administered over time to see if subjects provide similar responses to the same stimulus. Interview transcripts can be analyzed for internal consistency in the use of certain criteria or patterns of moral reasoning. Most importantly, according to Rest (1986), "the strongest validation of a test of moral judgment will be in its contribution along with knowledge of other variables in jointly explaining and predicting ongoing, real-life moral behavior" (p. 466). We agree with Rest, and we further argue that traditional test-retest and internal consistency measures may not be the most appropriate means of judging reliability in measuring viewer evaluations of TV content. We are not sure that we should expect viewers to apply the same evaluative criteria over time and across situations. Rather, some form of predictive validity may be the most useful to our program of research. Considerable research has been done on relating moral reasoning to such real-life behaviors as honesty, conformity, and altruistic behavior. There may be similar relationships between evaluations of ethical problems in TV content and real life behaviors such as viewing patterns, complaining behaviors, and other activities.

A review by Blasi (1980), seems to support some statistical relationships between moral reasoning and moral patterns of action. Blasi notes problems with inadequate theoretical bases for

moral judgment studies, and problems in measuring moral action in real-world settings. In the area of TV programming, the problems are no less severe. As noted, at this early stage of studying ethics and TV audiences, we lack a clear workable theory of how TV viewers respond to (and even define) ethical issues in TV programming. Few measures and even fewer concepts exist to help define what audience members might consider "ethical" or "responsible" behavior. Our program of research does suggest that many viewers express concern over problems that media researchers have noted as having ethical implications, such as violence, stereotyping, bias, invasion of privacy, and pressures of economics. However, our surveys have shown that fewer that 25 percent of our respondents (Lind & Rarick, 1992; Lind, 1992b) have ever taken any action to protest or attempt to change the behavior of broadcasters or TV programmers.

A third research issue is the ongoing problem encountered in researching the concept of "ethics" or "morality" using empirical or behavioral methods. The problems include but are not limited to: attaining adequate representation of the viewing population in large-sample surveys; developing test instruments that adequately measure the concept while still being clearly understandable by respondents; dealing with pressures of bias and social desirability response in interviews; reliably coding the responses of viewers from interview transcripts; developing reliable and valid operational definitions of key concepts; and writing or editing hypothetical or actual video stimulus materials that accurately represent the viewing situation and ethical issues actually presented in TV programming.

Conclusions

We have argued that media ethics scholars must pay more attention to the behaviors, ethical judgments, and responsibilities of the TV audience in order to develop a complete portrait of the role of media ethics in our society. We suggest media researchers should supplement traditional philosophical and case study analyses with empirical studies of audience response to ethical issues in the media. Such behavioral studies will ground ethical analyses more accurately in the processes and behaviors actually enacted by TV viewers, and might help to build more comprehensive models of media ethics and assist broadcasters in becoming more sensitive to the variety of responses audience members have to ethical issues that occur in TV programming.

We have outlined some key research and theoretical issues encountered in a four-year program of research on TV audience evaluations of ethical issues in TV programming. By using telephone surveys and long interviews, we have discovered some of the ways audience members evaluate and judge ethically controversial TV news and entertainment programs. Our major instrument is based on a series of hypothetical program scenario descriptions containing ethical dilemmas to which respondents react. The scenarios have generated rich data about how viewers evaluate TV programming (especially TV news) and have identified criteria used to evaluate ethically controversial TV content. The studies have also generated data on how viewers evaluate various methods of controlling problematic TV content, and have revealed differences between the levels of concern expressed about ethical problems in TV and willingness to take action to change those problems. Finally, we have developed a four-component model of viewer evaluations of ethically controversial TV content, and use the model to suggest areas in need of further research. The review of the research program has illustrated challenges faced by researchers doing work in audience response to ethical issues in TV programming. Some key challenges include the need to develop clearly defined concepts, developing realistic, understandable, yet broadly administered test instruments, enlargement of studies to more diverse subject populations and actual TV viewing situations, and development of a theory of audience response to ethical issues in TV programming.

We argue that media researchers can learn much about ethics research from studies in moral development and media credibility. Studies in these areas, although not directly relevant to concepts in media ethics, do suggest conceptual and methodological problems that must be addressed. Finally, empirical and behavioral researchers must work closely with media ethics scholars who use more traditional humanistic research methods. The work of philosophers and case study analysts can suggest many problem areas, concepts, processes, and evaluative systems that may be adapted for empirical research. Similarly, we suggest that behavioral studies on media ethics can do much to advance the work of media ethics scholars, and bring the roles and responsibilities of the TV audience into balance with those of the broadcaster and TV decision-maker.

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